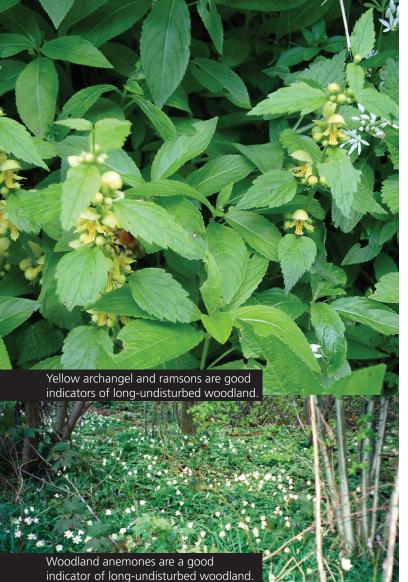# Woodland in the East Staffordshire landscape

Richard Stone explains that the natural landscape can be a resource for anyone exploring local topography.

The idea for researching this topic came while reading Oliver Rackham's excellent *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*. Calculations based on woodland recorded in Domesday Book revealed my home county of Staffordshire, with 32 per cent by surface land area, as the second most wooded county (after neighbouring Worcestershire) in Norman England. Despite this woodland heritage, Staffordshire does not feature in Dr Rackham's book (he admits a research 'bias' to eastern England). Why was medieval Staffordshire so wooded? Where was this Domesday *silva*? What was it used for? Does any of this woodland survive? If not, why and when was it cleared? These were the questions I set out to try and answer. For practical purposes, I limited my research to the present-day district of East Staffordshire. Modern administrative districts are not an obvious unit for a topographical study, but with elements of both upland moor and lowland vale, and a medieval hunting chase (Needwood Forest, subject to Forest Law for seven centuries) I hoped a 'snapshot' of this area would set a context for comparisons.

It is recommended practice when investigating the landscape to begin in the present (with the 'known') and to work backwards (to the 'unknown'). Rather fortuitously, an internet search turned up an ecological and botanical survey to identify ancient woodland in Staffordshire (defined as continuous cover by native trees since at least 1600) undertaken by English Nature, the results of which were published in 1993. For my research project, I aimed to combine this baseline inventory with documentary sources and a consideration of place-names, supplemented by topography and fieldwork.

I began by plotting all existing woodland of at least two hectares (approximately five acres). A sequence of OS maps enabled many of these to be traced back to 1834. Earlier maps from accurate surveys by Christopher Greenwood (1819-20) and William Yates (1769-75) took the story back further, enabling woods with names that suggested recent establishment e.g. Duckley 'Plantation', to be eliminated with confidence. Before Yates, the most important county maps of Staffordshire are by Robert Plot (probably surveyed by Gregory King in 1679-81) and Christopher Saxton's pioneering map of 1577. Both these maps use tree symbols to give an impression of woodland, but boundaries and outlines are not shown.

Ancient woodland acquires certain characteristics. Plants such as wood anemone, wood sorrel, yellow archangel, barren strawberry, profuse bluebells, ramsons and dog mercury, together with trees such as the small-leaved lime and midland hawthorn are good indicators of long-undisturbed woodland, as is the rare wild service tree (finding two of these was particularly exciting).

In the Staffordshire County Record Office, a wealth of relevant primary sources (pipe rolls; close and patent rolls; pleas of the forest; manorial accounts; inquisitions post mortem; estate surveys; enclosure awards; tithe maps) many reproduced by Staffordshire Record Society (for their *Collections for a History of Staffordshire)* provided information on the extent, distribution and management of woodland from the medieval period onwards and something of when clearance took place. An informed comparison with the entries in Domesday Book was now possible. Three

Yellow archangel and ramsons are good indicators of long-undisturbed woodland.

Woodland anemones are a good indicator of long-undisturbed woodland.

Extract from gazetteer of surviving ancient woodland in East Staffordshire

Historic Parish	Name/ Location/ Grid Ref.	Acres (est.)	Shown on: Indicated by: OS 1830s	Yates 1775	Plot 1682	Saxton 1577	Supporting evidence for ancient origin	Comments/ Site description
Abbots Bromley	Floyer's Coppice SK0828	(20)	✓	x	✓	✓		Research suggests this is replanted woodland of c.1800
	Bagot Forest SK0727	500	✓	✓	✓	✓	Disputes in Pipe Rolls Medieval glass furnaces Mature oaks noted 1817	Low lying, level site, light sandy soil
	Birch Wood SK1124	50	✓	✓	✓	✓		Low lying, level site Common Wood until 1795
	Dixon's Hill SK0928	80	✓	✓	✓	✓		Steep escarpment, heavy clay
	Birch Coppice SK1027	20	✓	✓	✓	✓		Exposed plateau, heavy clay
	Hart's Coppice SK1026	25	✓	✓	✓	✓		Low lying, level site
	Blackgutter SK0926	5	✓	✓	✓	✓		Low lying, level site
	*Bath Wood SK1023 (*part in Yoxall)	5	✓	x	x	x		Too small to show on Yates? Damp valley
Blithfield	Stansley Wood SK0525	10	✓	x	x	x		Low ridge beside Blithe Valley
	Newton Hurst SK0526	5	✓	x	x	x	Le Hurst in deed of 1257	Prominent ridge beside Blithe Valley
Bramshall	Carry Coppice SK0432	5	✓	✓	x	x	Field boundaries	Prominent ridge
Burton upon Trent	Henhurst Wood SK2124	4	✓	✓	x	✓	Medieval disputes in Burton Abbey Cartulary 100-year-old oak trees recorded 1585	Exposed plateau
	Oaks Wood SK2323	4	✓	✓	x	x	Identifiable with 'Forensic Wood' recorded 1324 later known as 'Outwood' common woodland enclosed in 1771	Steep slope, heavy clay
	Sandyford Dingle SK2223	1	✓	✓	✓	✓		Damp, low lying valley
	Battlestead Hill SK2022	3	✓	✓	✓	✓	Diagnostic plant species: barren strawberry, profuse bluebells	Exposed hilltop

pre-Conquest charters for manors in East Staffordshire took the story of some woodland beyond the Domesday survey. Supporting evidence was available from place-name clues; listing those with woodland relevance e.g. 'ley' suffixes, from Old English *leah* indicative in early-place-names of a settlement in or near woodland (although it came to mean 'pasture' or meadow in later periods) and 'Riddings', indicating woodland clearance.

You might say, 'So what?' Well, woodland is the natural climate vegetation of Britain. Its distribution, use, and clearance are particularly significant in understanding our past. And my initial questions?

Why was medieval Staffordshire so wooded? My conclusion was that a sparse population at the time of the Domesday Survey was a key factor (a multiplier of five applied to the Domesday headcount and allowing a margin of error produced a population estimate of 16,750 for the whole county).

Where was the Domesday *silva*? And what was it used for?

Woodland is recorded (by linear measure) in all but three of the 27 entries for East Staffordshire; one of these entries refers only to a borough and entries for the other two entries are amalgamated elsewhere. Totalling the Domesday entries gives an estimated

18,654 hectares (42,210 acres) area of woodland. From my research I was able to compile a gazetteer (see extract).

Of 26 mentions only three expand on merely *silva* to describe *silva pastilis* (wood pasture). There is no mention of *silva minuta* (wood coppice) but extensive stretches of Anglo-Saxon fish weirs have been excavated from old channels of the River Trent in East Staffordshire, including a single stretch of over 60 metres (195 feet). Such a large quantity of similar-sized hazel and willow rods used in construction can only have been harvested from coppices managed to produce a crop of straight poles of uniform diameter.

Has any Domesday woodland survived? If not, why and when was it cleared? My research identified 65 areas of woodland in East Staffordshire amounting to an estimated 1,035 hectares (2,558 acres) surviving in some form from the Domesday Survey (around 5.5 per cent of the Domesday estimate). Population growth in the late-twelfth century put pressure on woodland and marks the beginning of significant woodland clearance. Topography, place-names, field patterns and a series of land grants provide evidence of colonisation, encroachment and piecemeal enclosure from this time. Recorded assarts (legal and illegal) are individually small but together they add up to substantial areas. With encroachment came increased regulation of common rights. Charters and assize rolls record numerous examples of restrictions, or attempted restrictions, meeting with vigorous defence of their rights by commoners. In 1199, the King's Court found that Nicholas of Mugginton had withheld the rights of Thomas son of Ralph to common in a wood at Stanton. In 1204, the first in a number of recorded disputes between Burton Abbey and its tenants, Abbot William Melburne lost a claim of novel disseisin in woodland at Abbot's Bromley.

By 1600 hunting, though still popular, was in decline and wood pasture formerly preserved as an environment for the chase was increasingly turned over to more conventional farmland pasture for cattle. Disputes recorded in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century plea rolls suggest unsustainable over-grazing of common wood pasture. It is around this time industrial exploitation of woodland increases (e.g. potash & charcoal for a local glass-making industry) and enclosures begin to have an impact. Agrarian change in the nineteenth century accelerated the loss of woodland. A noticeable feature of surviving ancient woodland is that it occupies the most

Extract from William Yates' one inch to one mile county map of Staffordshire (1769-75)

marginal land: exposed hilly eminences; north facing slopes; light sandy soils; stiff boulder clays; and the damp floors of steep-sided valleys.

There is a wealth of information available to historians from woodland study, particularly when documentary and archaeological sources are combined with topography and fieldwork.

Further reading

O. Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (1976, London).

D.P. Robinson and A. Whitbread, *Staffordshire Inventory of Ancient Woodland* (Peterborough, 1993).

G.F. Peterken, 'A method for assessing woodland flora for conservation using indicator species', *Biological Conservation*. 6 (1974), pp. 239-245.

N.J. Tringham, ed., *V.C.H. Staffordshire*, 10 (Woodbridge, 2007).

M. Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London, 1984).

A.D.M. Phillips, 'A Map of the County of Stafford by William Yates, 1775', *Collections for a History of Staffordshire*.

D. Horowitz, *Staffordshire Place-Names* (Brewood, 2005).

M. Gelling, *Signposts to the Past* (London, 1978).

D. Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon Staffordshire; the Charter Evidence* (Keele, 1983).

D.M. Palliser, *The Staffordshire Landscape* (London, 1976).

J. Morris, *Domesday Book, Staffordshire* (Chichester, 1976).

H.C. Darby, *Domesday England* (Cambridge, 1977).

Richard Stone is a Leicester University-trained extra-mural tutor active in Derbyshire and Staffordshire, with strong interest in the interpretation of visual evidence.